



“Surge Recovery” and Next Steps in the War in Afghanistan: In Brief

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January 6, 2012

Congressional Research Service

7-5700

www.crs.gov

R42137

Report Documentation Page			<i>Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188</i>	
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1. REPORT DATE 06 JAN 2012	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2012 to 00-00-2012		
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE 'Surge Recovery' and Next Steps in the War in Afghanistan: In Brief			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
			5b. GRANT NUMBER	
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)			5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
			5e. TASK NUMBER	
			5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) The Library of Congress ,Congressional Research Service,101 Independence Ave, SE,Washington,DC,20540			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)			10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
			11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited				
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES				
14. ABSTRACT				
15. SUBJECT TERMS				
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 8
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON	

On June 22, 2011, President Obama delivered a major policy speech in which he laid out the parameters for “surge recovery”—the Administration’s new term of art that refers to the drawdown of all U.S. surge forces from Afghanistan. Surge recovery has subsequently generated considerable interest across the U.S. political spectrum, including in Congress. Yet troop levels are only one facet of much broader U.S. government engagement in Afghanistan. Basic, broader strategic issues at stake, all of which have implications for the troop levels debate, include:

- What fundamental national security interests does the United States have in Afghanistan and the region?
- What minimum conditions—political, economic, security—would need to pertain in Afghanistan in order for those U.S. interests to be protected?
- How appropriate are current and projected future U.S. approaches for helping Afghans establish those conditions?
- When and to what extent are Afghans likely to be able to sustain those conditions with relatively limited support from the international community?
- Ultimately, how important is this overall effort—given its likely timeline, risks, and costs—compared to other U.S. government priorities?

This report draws in part on the author’s recent three-week visit to Afghanistan, in November 2011, based on an invitation from the Commander of NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), General John Allen. It provides initial observations about surge recovery in broader operational and strategic context, and links those observations to current debates that may be of interest to Congress as it considers the strength and duration of further U.S. involvement in Afghanistan.¹ This report will not be updated.

Background

Since assuming office, the Obama Administration has articulated consistent core goals for the war—to defeat al-Qaeda and prevent future safe havens in Afghanistan and Pakistan.² Less clear to many observers is exactly what it would take to prevent future safe havens.

Much of the rationale behind current U.S. government civilian and military efforts in Afghanistan dates back to 2009, when General Stanley McChrystal took command of ISAF and was tasked to conduct an initial strategic assessment.³ That assessment, and the subsequent ISAF campaign design, were based on the Administration’s two core goals as well as on the novel prospect of

¹ For further analysis related to Afghanistan, see additional CRS reports by Amy Belasco, Susan Chesser, Catherine Dale, Kenneth Katzman, Alan Kronstadt, Rhoda Margesson, Moshe Schwartz, Curt Tarnoff, Liana Wyler.

² President Barack Obama, Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Washington, DC, March 27, 2009, available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-on-a-New-Strategy-for-Afghanistan-and-Pakistan/. The war in Afghanistan began in late 2011 with U.S.-led coalition military operation designed to remove Afghanistan’s Taliban-led regime and prevent future terrorist safe havens, in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

³ General Stanley McChrystal, COMISAF’s Initial Assessment, August 30, 2009, available in redacted form from the *Washington Post*, at http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment_Redacted_092109.pdf. The author was part of that assessment team.

more troops, more civilian expertise, more resources, more highest-level leadership attention, and relatively unlimited time.

Subsequently, three major sets of constraints were imposed on the effort:

- In December 2009, in a major policy speech at West Point, President Obama announced both that a troop surge would take place, and that those troops would begin to draw down in July 2011.⁴
- In November 2010, at the NATO Lisbon Summit, the Afghan government and the NATO Allies, including the United States, agreed on a formal “Transition” process, in which lead responsibility for security would transition to the Afghan government. This process would begin in early 2011 and be completed by the end of 2014.⁵
- In June 2011, President Obama announced parameters for drawing down the surge forces. From the surge peak of about 100,000 U.S. troops, the U.S. troop commitment to Afghanistan would draw down by 10,000 troops by the end of 2011, and by a further 23,000 by the end of September 2012, reaching a total of 68,000 by that date. Afterwards, the pace of further drawdowns would be “steady” and at some point the mission would change “from combat to support.”⁶

Practitioners and observers note that the overall campaign remains based on the same two core goals but must now meet them with less time and fewer resources. For some, this raises a basic question: to what extent, if any, do recent additional constraints on time and resources introduce greater “risk”—in terms of cost, time, casualties, or ability to accomplish the mission? Some observers predict that the next major marker in decision-making regarding the war in Afghanistan may be the NATO Lisbon Summit scheduled to take place in Chicago in May 2012.

Current Debates

Troop Numbers

A number of observers have argued for “accelerating” the pace of U.S. troop drawdowns from Afghanistan, while others, including some commanders on the ground, have urged maintaining as many troops in theater as possible through the 2013 fighting season. For those for whom the primary imperative is to bring the troops home, the conditions on the ground in Afghanistan may be largely irrelevant. For those concerned with outcomes in Afghanistan, it may be helpful to consider the troop numbers debate in terms of remaining requirements.

⁴ President Barack Obama, Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan, West Point, NY, December 1, 2009, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan>.

⁵ NATO Lisbon Summit Declaration, Lisbon, Portugal, November 20, 2010, available at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_68828.htm?mode=pressrelease.

⁶ President Barack Obama, Remarks by the President on the Way Forward in Afghanistan, Washington, DC, June 22, 2011, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/06/22/remarks-president-way-forward-afghanistan>.

One approach to requirements is to consider the current status of the “fight” on the ground:

- In 2009, the McChrystal assessment introduced geographic prioritization of effort across the entire Afghan theater.⁷ The campaign named southern Afghanistan, including the Taliban’s traditional homeland in Kandahar province, and its breadbasket next door in Helmand province, the “main effort.” Parts of eastern Afghanistan, where insurgents, particularly the Haqqani network, enjoyed sanctuaries and transit routes out to safe havens in Pakistan, were the collective second priority.
- In late 2011, ISAF and Afghan commanders pointed to significant progress over the past two years against the insurgencies. But they also noted that combined (Afghan and coalition) clearing operations were still underway just outside Kandahar city, that the “hold” function in the south would require a substantial Afghan army and police force backed for some while by coalition forces, and that—given Kandahar’s strategic importance—the south remained the main effort.⁸
- In late 2011, Afghan and coalition forces operating in eastern Afghanistan gave priority to protecting Kabul and securing the provinces immediately south of it. This was in part a response to increased targeting of Kabul by the Haqqani network, who were reportedly pressured by Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to do so. Key supporting efforts for the combined force in eastern Afghanistan included securing the long border with Pakistan and continuing to disrupt Haqqani movement and sanctuaries in their traditional tribal homeland.⁹

Most observers suggest that Afghanistan’s future prospects for security, narrowly defined, depend on diminishing the current insurgent threat, as well as sufficiently bolstering the capabilities of Afghan forces to meet residual and future threats. In that context, questions that might help inform the debates about the next steps for U.S. troop levels include:

- How much must the level of insurgent threat in Afghanistan be reduced, to help ensure that Afghan forces can contend successfully with the residual challenge with minimal international assistance? To what extent is the participation of U.S. combat forces now in combined operations with Afghan partners necessary to reduce the threat?
- How good do Afghan forces need to be, to contend effectively with a residual insurgent threat? To what extent is a continued U.S. force presence—and with what force mix—necessary to help bolster their ability?
- What other purposes does a U.S. force presence need to serve, if any, toward meeting U.S. core goals—for example, serving as a deterrent to those who would challenge Afghanistan’s sovereignty, or providing leverage for U.S. efforts to help shape a broader political settlement process aimed at ending the war?

⁷ General Stanley McChrystal, COMISAF’s Initial Assessment, note 2, *supra*.

⁸ Interviews with ISAF officials, 2011.

⁹ Interviews with ISAF officials, 2011. Department of Defense, Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan,” October 2011, available at http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/October_2011_Section_1230_Report.pdf.

Mission

Some prominent observers have recently argued for changing the overall mission of U.S. forces in Afghanistan to “advise and assist”—a rough echo of President Obama’s broad guidance that the mission will shift at some point from “combat” to “support.” Most observers agree that at some juncture, the shift should involve the introduction of small teams that embed with much larger Afghan units and provide advisory support, together with a reduction in the role of U.S. combat forces.¹⁰ Yet the strategic-level debate, framed in terms of a binary choice between changing the mission or not, maps poorly to reality on the ground, where “combat” and “support” are not mutually exclusive—they not only co-exist but also mutually reinforce each other.

Key elements of background and current context include:

- One of the central tenets of the 2009 McChrystal review was the need for enhanced “unit partnering,” in which like Afghan and coalition units live, train, plan, and execute together, 24/7. The premise is that partnering jumpstarts a partner force’s capabilities, including leadership, by “showing” not just “telling.” In this construct, coalition units are bolstering their partners’ capabilities while participating directly in combined operations targeting the insurgencies.¹¹
- By late 2011, with the maturation of unit partnering, particularly with the Afghan National Army, coalition forces were leaning forward into the next phase—drawing back, doing less themselves, and encouraging Afghans to make Afghan systems work. Key questions from ISAF commanders to their own subordinates included: What essential things does your Afghan partner unit still have a hard time with? What is your plan to help them get there? How much time will that take? In contrast to a blanket “mission change” declaration, such de facto transition was taking place unit-by-unit, and location-by-location.¹²
- On the ground, many commanders suggest that the logic of the shift in U.S. force posture, from combat units to advisory teams, should not necessarily be “consecutive”—what makes better sense is to gradually decrease the roles played by coalition forces, to introduce advisory teams, to “let Afghan units fail” to some extent, but to maintain a sufficient coalition combat force presence during that process to “pick up the pieces” or prevent catastrophic failure if necessary.¹³

Questions that might help inform the debates about the next steps concerning mission include:

- What value if any—either operational or strategic—might there be in a blanket declaration of mission change across the entire theater, as opposed to the evolution of roles and responsibilities that is currently underway?

¹⁰ Lieutenant General Dave W. Barno, USA (ret), Dr. Andrew Exum, and Matthew Irvine, *The Next Flight: Time for a Change of Mission in Afghanistan*, Policy Brief, Center for a New American Security, December 2011, http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS_TheNextFlight_BarnoExumIrvine.pdf; and John Nagl and Michael O’Hanlon, Afghan Strategy Begins to Make Gains, Politico, December 6, 2011, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1211/69881.html>.

¹¹ General Stanley McChrystal, COMISAF’s Initial Assessment, and interviews with ISAF officials, 2009 and 2010.

¹² Interviews with ISAF officials, 2011.

¹³ Ibid.

- Under an advisory construct, what is the proper division of labor over time between coalition combat units and advisory teams?

Economy

Afghanistan’s ability to sustain itself after reductions in contributions by the international community was long the little-discussed elephant in the room in strategic-level debates, but it emerged as a focus of attention in 2011. At the strategic level, sustainability is the central theme of the new U.S. Economic Strategy for Afghanistan, published in December 2011 in response to a congressional mandate.¹⁴ On the ground, as of late 2011, the concern with sustainability was reflected in what practitioners called a “paradigm shift” in both the theory and practice of U.S. civilian and military assistance efforts.¹⁵

Key facets of background and context include:

- Many practitioners and observers argue that a shift in economic approaches is long overdue, since years of relatively indiscriminate spending led to an array of unproductive or counterproductive results. These, it is argued, have included an inability to track money spent; the flow of assistance funds out of the country; the distortion of labor markets; investment in systems or components that Afghans did not want or could not sustain; and the empowerment of “thugs.”¹⁶
- As of late 2011, the central tenets of the new thinking included making Afghan systems work; strictly prioritizing U.S. efforts among Afghan ministries and systems to focus on the most essential; getting international assistance on-budget; providing technical assistance; *doing* less directly; and spending less money.¹⁷

Questions that might help inform the debates about the next steps for Afghanistan’s economy include:

- What kind of a system can the likely future Afghan economy—barring exogenous shocks to the system—realistically be expected to support?
- As the balance of U.S. support shifts from providing things—a role that has given the U.S. government a prominent seat at the table—to providing advice, will the U.S. government be able to maintain sufficient leverage to help shape an overall settlement process?
- Given that most observers agree that it will take time for Afghans to develop the ability to generate, collect, and spend revenues, and that international assistance is likely to diminish significantly in the near-term, what are the risks to Afghan stability in the near-term? To what extent and in what ways might the international community help mitigate these risks?

¹⁴ See National Security Staff, U.S. Economic Strategy for Afghanistan, December 2, 2011; crafted in response to the Ike Skelton National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2011, P.L. 111-383, January 7, 2011, Section 1535.

¹⁵ Interviews with U.S. Embassy Kabul and ISAF officials, 2011.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Governance

An array of triggers—including the 2010 Kabul Bank crisis, doubts about Afghanistan’s political future after its 2014 presidential elections, and a heightened sense that the leverage of the international community may diminish with troop drawdowns and decreased assistance—has pushed the Afghanistan debates to consider “how much is enough” in terms of good governance.

Key facets of background and context include:

- The 2009 McChrystal assessment argued that governance should be on par with security as a focus of the campaign. The basic theory was that the primary arbiter of lasting stability in Afghanistan is the Afghan people—the extent to which they accept the system and are able to hold it accountable. Accountability measures—of which Afghanistan enjoyed few, after decades of upheaval—might include everything from formal elections, to the traditional voice of inclusive local councils, to a vibrant media, to a robust civil society. If the people viewed government officials as looking out for themselves and not for the people, they would be more likely to reject the system and refuse to participate in it. So, the theory ran, the international community—while it enjoyed significant leverage—should help the Afghan people foster accountable governance.¹⁸
- By late 2011, some of the international community’s efforts to support good governance had matured. At sub-national levels of governance, the international community, prompted by complaints by Afghan communities, had worked with Afghan ministries to bring about the removal—not just the “recycling” to other posts—of some particularly pernicious district-level officials.¹⁹
- For higher levels of authority within the Afghan system, some international practitioners long argued for seeking the removal from office of Afghan powerbrokers—such as Brigadier General Razziq, the Acting Provincial Chief of Police in Kandahar, and Governor Sherzai of Nangarhar province—who were perceived by some to be working for themselves rather than for the Afghan people. By late 2011, consensus appeared to be emerging around a more pragmatic, laissez-faire approach: “shaping” the incentive structure for some powerbrokers and encouraging them to behave more, rather than less, constructively. Broadly in this vein, some practitioners contended that the international community, with its limited language skills and cultural awareness, can hardly be savvy enough to understand all the subtleties of Afghan relationship networks and power structures. Others argued that de facto Afghan authority structures, including powerbrokers who naturally command attention when they walk into the room and can “get things done,” may be a reasonable basis for stability in the Afghan context.²⁰

Questions that might help inform the debates about the next steps in Afghan governance include:

¹⁸ General Stanley McChrystal, COMISAF’s Initial Assessment, note 2, *supra*.

¹⁹ Interviews with ISAF officials, 2011.

²⁰ Interviews with U.S. Embassy Kabul and ISAF officials, 2011.

- What kind of durable stability can be achieved in a system based in part on self-interested powerbrokers largely unconstrained by accountability mechanisms?
- How do Afghans envisage “accountability” and the mechanisms necessary to make it work? What might the U.S. government do to support their vision?

How Does This End?

At the operational and tactical levels, it can appear that the “theory of victory” for the war in Afghanistan, the logic that links current approaches to a desired endstate, is the gradual accretion of gains in Afghan civilian and security capability, together with an incrementally diminished insurgency. Yet many observers generally suggest instead that durable stability may require minimum conditions, including:

- Afghan security forces can sufficiently protect and defend the Afghan people;
- the provision of security is broadly subject to responsible and accountable Afghan governance;
- that system of governance, in turn, is subject to accountability mechanisms actively exercised by the Afghan people;
- that responsive, accountable system is broadly sustainable—based on at least a nascent economy; and
- no outside state spoilers are allowed to disrupt Afghanistan’s stability.

Questions that might help inform the debates about the end of the war in Afghanistan include:

- How well do the major components of the combined and civil-military effort—the campaign on the ground, economic strategy, political strategy including a reconciliation process, and regional approaches—fit together and inform each other, in a single roadmap, against a timeline? What assumptions does that roadmap make? What risks does it allow?
- Under what conditions would a political reconciliation process be most likely to catalyze overall progress toward durable stability in Afghanistan?
- As part of that comprehensive roadmap, what roles should the U.S. government play? What roles are more appropriately played by other actors, first of all Afghans, and also including other members of the international community?
- Given the full panoply of U.S. national security interests and broader concerns, what should be the relative priority of Afghanistan for the U.S. government?

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